

ABOLITION: SOME INFORMATION ABOUT THE VICTORIAN PRISON SYSTEM AND WHY WE ARE WORKING TOWARDS ABOLITION

The Prison System and Structural Racism

- The growth of the prison population in Victoria is disproportionately affecting communities who experience structural racism. The risk of imprisonment is further increased by class and gender oppression.
- Indigenous people in Australia are 16 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous people.
- In Victoria, Indigenous people are more likely to be held on remand because they are more likely to be homeless¹ due to historical and ongoing colonial processes of dispossession, displacement and exploitation.
- Most recently, women born in Vietnam are Victoria's fastest growing prison population, 2009 figures show they represented almost 14% of women in prison, which is a severely disproportionate incarceration rate when the 2006 Census recorded only 1.2% of the total female population in Victoria as born in Vietnam.
- Reports document the existence of racist abuse, intimidation and discrimination in Victorian prisons.² This increases the severity of punishment for prisoners who are racialised and increases their risk of stress, depression and trauma both while inside and upon release.³
- 20% of people inside men's prisons and 24% in women's prisons were born in non-English speaking countries. Imprisoned people who have a first language other than English face translation and interpretation difficulties and costs, and are more likely to be systematically excluded from programming that may contribute to an earlier release date.

Gendered Punishment

- The number of people in women's prisons in Victoria has been increasing steadily since the 1960s, from around 30 women in 1960 to 50 in 1980, 120 in 1990, 200 in 2000 and currently in excess of 300.
- The rate of increase for women has exceeded the rate of increase in the men's prison population. This pattern has been repeated in all Australian States and Territories, and in the United Kingdom, United States, Japan and most European countries.⁴
- Most of the people in women's prisons have experienced physical, sexual and emotional abuse, including abuse and neglect as children.
- Around 75% of women in prison are primary care givers and worry about children's safety greatly impacts how imprisoned mothers survive their sentence day to day and over the long term.
- Children of imprisoned mothers are deeply impacted; they face grief, anger, low self-esteem, bullying, poverty and minimal support – kids whose mums are in jail are more likely to end up incarcerated themselves.⁵

¹ Request for a Systemic Review of Discrimination against Women in Victoria's Prisons (FCLC and VCOSS, 2005); Parliamentary Inquiry into the Impact of Drug-Related Offending on Female Prisoner Numbers (Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee, 2010)

² FCLC and VCOSS, 2005; Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Women in Victorian Prisons (CHRIP, 2010)

³ Multilingual Health Education with Immigrant Women in Victorian Women's Prisons: Project Report (Working Women's Health, 2002-2004: 27)

⁴ Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee, 2010

⁵ Children: Unintended Victims of Legal Process (Flat Out Inc. and VACRO, 2006)

Failing Health in the Prison System

- The rate of hepatitis C infection in Victoria's prisons is 41%, compared to just 1% in the general public,⁶ yet imprisoned people are denied access to Medicare and Needle and Syringe Programs.
- Imprisonment is far more expensive than community mental health care: Victorian Government annual spending on prisons (excluding community corrections) has increased 151% over the past decade to \$593 million in 2011/12.
- The current law and order discourse focuses on punishment rather than community safety and rehabilitation; this increases the likelihood of people with mental health issues being incarcerated.
- We can support people experiencing mental health difficulties through work to alleviate social disadvantage, improved community involvement and universal mental health services.

What about Abolition?⁷

- As the information above suggests, we believe that the prison system reinforces social and economic inequalities by punishing, stigmatising, impoverishing and further marginalising many of the most marginalised people in our communities.
- We want to create safe communities without relying on prisons and policing to deal with harm. We use the term abolition to refer to the long-term goal of abolishing the Prison-Industrial Complex (PIC). The PIC encompasses prisons, policing, the courts and their corporate and state-based investments and interests.
- The term 'abolition' originates from those who called for the abolition of slavery in the United States in the 1800s. We are indebted to these radical thinkers and actors when we draw on this history to advocate for abolishing – not fixing or reforming – the PIC.
- The end goal of abolition is to reduce harm in our communities by creating lasting alternatives to punishment and prisons by strengthening progressive education, housing, health care and employment systems.
- We believe in accountability, but we do not see how locking people in cages produces long-term community accountability. True accountability means that individuals and groups must be held responsible for harms that occur by providing for community needs and by working towards racial, economic and gender justice.
- Abolition is something we may not see in our lifetime. Today, that means we work to develop practical strategies for taking small steps toward abolition. This includes stopping prison expansion and increases in policing and surveillance, as well as developing community responses to harm.

**For more information or to get involved, contact the Abolition Collective:
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⁶ Victorian Ombudsman, 2011: 10

⁷ This section is largely drawn from Critical Resistance (US): www.criticalresistance.org